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70 MPH Speed Limit Bill Moving Forward in State Senate

MANITOWOC – *Rep. Paul Tittl (R-Manitowoc) and State Senator Devin LeMahieu (R-Oostburg) made the following comments today in response to a proposed amendment to the bill raising the maximum speed limit in Wisconsin to 70 mph.*

“The Assembly passed the 70 mph hour speed limit bill last month by a wide margin (76-22),” Tittl said. “I am pleased the Senate Transportation Committee is voting on the bill on Thursday.”

“The amended bill is still a win for commuters, and continues to ensure safe roadways,” said LeMahieu. “I am glad this common sense legislation is moving forward.”

“The impetus for raising the speed limit to 70 mph is to make travel safer, and I support the Senate amendment clarifying that the 70 mph limit will not apply to expressway segments where there are at-grade crossings,” continued Tittl. “That change will have little effect on the bill, because the DOT would not have approved the higher speed limit on expressway segments with at-grade crossings anyway.”

Speed limits were often 70 mph on rural highways until the federal government set a maximum speed limit of 55 mph in 1974, largely to conserve fuel during the energy crisis. In 1995, federal regulations were abolished and states returned to setting their own limits. Many states immediately raised limits back to 70 mph or higher, but Wisconsin adopted a 65 mph limit.

Wisconsin is now the only state in the Midwest with a 65 mile per hour maximum speed limit for all roadways. This bill will align the state’s speed limit with that of neighboring states and most of the country.

Traffic safety engineers throughout the country recognize the safest place to set the speed limit is the speed at which 85% of the people are driving at or below. Speeds higher than the 85th percentile speed are less safe. Similarly, speeds below the 85th percentile are less safe as well.

Under the amended bill, the DOT would retain the ability to keep the limit at 65 mph on certain stretches of highway if doing so is in the best interest of safety. The DOT has studied the issue and found that average speeds on many Wisconsin highways are well above 70 mph already. On several segments of highway, 15% of the drivers are already driving over 75 mph.

Setting speed limits at the proper level can significantly reduce aggressive driving behaviors. In Michigan changes made to roadways where aggressive driving had occurred reduced the reported incidents of road rage. When the speed limit was raised from 55 mph to 70 mph along a section of Interstate 496 outside of Lansing, which accounted for 40 percent of reported

incidents of aggressive driving in that area, incidents of aggressive driving dropped to nearly zero.

People often make the argument that raising the speed limit by 5 mph will result in drivers automatically driving 5 mph faster than they had been. The data does not support that argument.

Drivers do not go faster than their comfort level. When Missouri raised its maximum speed limit in the 1990s, the average speed remained about 71 mph, just where it had been when the maximum speed limit was 65. Iowa had a similar result when it raised its limit in 2005.

Following approval by the senate Transportation Committee on Thursday, the bill will head to the full Senate next week.

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